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THE US POLICY OF DUAL CONTAINMENT TOWARD IRAN  
AND IRAQ IN THEORY AND PRACTICE

by

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### *Abstract*

The policy of dual containment has been adopted by the Clinton administration as a method whereby the nations of Iran and Iraq may be simultaneously prevented from embarking upon actions deemed counter to the interests of the international community in general, and the United States in particular. This is a departure from policies of previous administrations which had sought a balance of power between the two nations in order to contain whichever nation seemed to present the greatest threat at the time. The ability of the United States to embark on a strategy of containing these two states at once, is a result of the new world order in which America finds itself as the sole remaining superpower, able to work its will with a degree of impunity heretofore unknown.

The problem to be considered here is whether this strategy is indeed appropriate and whether it will achieve the desired outcomes with respect to US security strategy. This paper analyzes the position of the Clinton administration in light of current and historic US interests in the Persian Gulf region. It examines the opinions of various strategists and academicians regarding the policy of dual containment in order to determine if this policy can be an effective one. The conclusion of this research is that a linkage of US policy between the two nations of Iran and Iraq is inappropriate. While the state of Iraq must be contained to prevent its aggressive activities, diplomatic methods should be applied to Iran in the hope of engendering a renewed relationship.

## Chapter 1

### Introduction: US Hegemony

*If we are to regard ourselves as a grown-up nation, then we must, as the Biblical phrase goes, put away childish things; and among these childish things, the first to go should be self-idealization and the search for absolutes in world affairs.*

George Frost Kennan

During his State of the Union Address on January 23, 1980, President Jimmy Carter declared that “an attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force.”<sup>1</sup>

This dramatic declaration, which came to be known as the Carter Doctrine, was precipitated by tumultuous events in the gulf region. Occurrences such as the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the Iranian revolution with the resulting establishment of an Islamic republic under the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, and the seizure of the US embassy in Teheran clearly demonstrated the fragile and tenuous nature of political stability in this crucial area.

At that moment, the magnitude and scope of US interests was vividly clear. Encroachment by the Soviet Union into this critical global crossroads was a real concern, the free flow of oil had been diminished by the embargo of 1973 and again curtailed by recent events in Iran, and the stability of the entire Middle East had been repeatedly



jeopardized by a seemingly endless litany of hostilities thereby threatening to draw the United States into regional if not global conflict. With his succinct statement, President Carter put the world on notice that the United States saw the Persian Gulf region as an area of vital interest. Moreover, it defined with great clarity the direction that America would take regarding the future of this important area of the world.

The United States is firmly entrenched today in the affairs of the Middle Eastern states to include those in the Persian Gulf region. In the words of Michael C. Hudson, Seif Ghobash Professor of Arab Studies and professor of international relations at the School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University, “the United States stands astride this unhappy region like a colossus; the dominant power over the Middle East.”<sup>2</sup> As the sole superpower, the US is in the unique position of being able to exert its influence with near impunity in a region almost half a world away. This is a situation that has evolved over a number of years, more by happenstance than by design. The United States has in this time, identified key interests in the region that have seen involvement based on diplomacy, aid, culture, education, espionage, subversion, and the projection of military power.<sup>3</sup> In this light, President Carter’s words proved prophetic indeed, as the resolve of the United States ultimately culminated in a US-led military coalition which used force to liberate the tiny nation of Kuwait from Iraqi invaders, guaranteeing in the process that US vital interests in the Gulf were protected.

It should not be so surprising, therefore, that the United States finds itself a leader in the region with all the responsibilities and obligations attendant to such a position. To quote G. John Ikenberry, Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of

Pennsylvania, “America is not adrift in uncharted seas: it is at the center of a world of its own making.”<sup>4</sup>

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Daniel C. Diller (editor), *The Middle East* (Washington D.C.: Congressional Quarterly, Inc., 1994), 75.

<sup>2</sup> Michael C. Hudson, “To Play the Hegemon: Fifty Years of US Policy Toward the Middle East,” *The Middle East Journal* vol. 50, no. 3 (Summer 1996): 329.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> John G. Ikenberry, “The Myth of Post Cold War Chaos,” *Foreign Affairs* vol. 75, no. 3 (May/June 1996): 91.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Scope of US Interests in the Persian Gulf Region**

*America well knows that by once enlisting under other banners than her own, were they even the banners of foreign independence, she would involve herself beyond the power of extraction, in all the wars of interest and intrigue, of individual avarice, envy and ambition, which assume the colors and usurp the standard of freedom.*

John Quincy Adams

The United States is now firmly entrenched in the Persian Gulf region and maintains a constant presence in order to protect interests deemed vital. These interests range from the free flow of Middle Eastern oil at stable prices, to the protection of US allies, to the containment of states that are thought to be a threat. Consequently, there is a dynamic with the governments of Iran and Iraq that has lead to the current policy of dual containment of these nations. How did the United States arrive in this position and what were these vital interests perceived to be over time? This section will explore these questions and provide a framework with which to analyze the current policy.

### **US Interests**

The interests of the United States in this region, which have drawn it into an ever increasing level of involvement since World War II have been basically threefold—the containment of the former Soviet Union as part of a global strategy, the establishment and

continued existence of the state of Israel, and the free flow of Persian Gulf oil to the rest of the worldwide economy at stable prices. These interests in their various forms continue today and signal ongoing involvement in this very crucial world arena.

### **Containment of communism**

If there was one overarching goal of US foreign policy after World War II, it was, arguably, the containment of Soviet communism. While the Eastern European region took center stage as the front line against Soviet encroachment, with the forces of NATO at the ready, the US-Soviet chess match was carried out in other areas of the globe as well.

In 1958, John C. Campbell, a former State Department official, with the help of a study group from the Council on Foreign Relations, published *Defense of the Middle East*, an account of how the foreign policy establishment viewed the trends in the Middle East.<sup>1</sup> This work stated that “the entrenchment of Soviet power in that strategic region would bring a decisive shift in the world balance, outflanking NATO; Soviet control of Middle Eastern oil could disrupt the economy of the free world; and the triumph of communism in the heart of the Islamic world could be the prelude to its triumph throughout Asia, Africa, and Europe.”<sup>2</sup> Clearly, the concern for the future of the Middle East was keenly felt, motivating a concerted effort toward the promotion of US interests in the area.

US policy sought to contain the Soviets in the Middle East through military alliances as it was doing in Europe. This approach largely failed, however, as the ideas of pan-Arabism and the regional threat of Israel occupied the attention of the Arab states. The problem for American diplomacy with respect to good relations with Arab states was the

conflicting goal of Israeli security and the US strategic linkage to that state. The US-Soviet game was being played on the ideological terrain of Middle Eastern politics which gave the Soviets an inroad through such actions as its arms deals with Syria and Egypt.<sup>3</sup>

The Soviets had their own problems in the Middle East to be sure. Pan-Arab nationalism and communism are not largely compatible ideals, and the Soviets were often clumsy in their military aid relationships.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, atheistic communism was antithetical to Islam. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, a major regional actor was eliminated from the playing field, leaving the United States in a position to pursue its interests with far greater agility and freedom. While the Soviet threat is no longer a concern, it is important to remember that the fear of Soviet encroachment provided a driving force for US involvement in the Persian Gulf, contributing to a significant US involvement and a complicated set of relationships to this day. In addition, while the Soviet threat is gone, the US now faces other regional ideologies and regimes with aspirations of hegemony, that will continue to provide a challenge into the future.

### **Arab/Israeli peace process**

While such notions as access to Persian Gulf oil and denial of control over this crucial commodity to the Soviets provide obvious reasons for US involvement in the Persian Gulf, the strategic linkage of the gulf region to the state of Israel may seem tenuous and peripheral. Although Israel does not share a border with any of the Persian Gulf states (it borders Jordan at the head of the Gulf of Aqaba), and while its territory lies over a thousand kilometers from the waters of the Persian Gulf, it has, nevertheless, been a driving force in the strategy of the region as its involvement with Arab states has brought every regional actor into the fray.

Just as Israel was nearly drawn into the 1991 conflict between Iraq and coalition forces, so too were the Persian Gulf Arab states involved, either as combatants or states with strong convictions, in the conflicts with Israel in 1948, 1967, and 1973. Indeed, Iraqi forces were part of the Arab contingent involved in the conflict after British forces withdrew from Palestine in 1948.<sup>5</sup> And the 1973 war resulted in a remarkably effective Arab oil embargo against the US. While Arab/Israeli acrimony has more traditionally manifested itself in open hostilities involving Egypt and Syria, the pan-Arab nature of the region has drawn Arab Persian Gulf states into the morass if only as polemical players and checkbook diplomats in the Arab League.<sup>6</sup>

The Arab/Israeli concern was also linked to the Persian Gulf in the overall strategic notion of containment of the Soviet Union, denial of a regional foothold, and limiting outside control over Persian Gulf oil. As previously mentioned, the US relationship with Israel has been fertile ground for involvement by the Soviets, occasionally escalating the regional frustrations inherent in the area to superpower confrontations, as was the case during the 1973 war.

It is evident, therefore, that the Arab/Israeli relationship inexorably ties into the calculus of Persian Gulf strategy. This is especially so since the regimes in both Baghdad and Teheran have been quite vocal in their disdain for the notion of a permanent Israeli state. The rhetoric from both these nations has been bellicose and has apparently manifested itself in support for terrorist opposition to the Arab/Israeli peace process in the case of Iran, and the launching of missiles against Israel during the Gulf war in the case of Iraq. Clearly this issue is part of the synergy of interests that has complicated US involvement with regional players for decades.

## **Access to Persian Gulf oil**

One simple fact drives home the importance of this region to the health of the global economy. Of the proven oil reserves available worldwide, approximately two-thirds lie in the Persian Gulf region.<sup>7</sup> Just as the British, at the beginning of the century had seen the potential economic value of Middle East oil, so too did the Americans—for the prosecution of World War II, as a cheap supplement to declining US reserves, and to fuel the West's oil-driven post-war economic development.<sup>8</sup>

In 1971, oil importing nations paid about two dollars per barrel for oil produced by the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC).<sup>9</sup> It is hardly surprising therefore that the industrialized nations would become dependent on the flow of petroleum.<sup>10</sup> In the 1970s, with European and Japanese dependency at well over two-thirds of total consumption, Americans found that half of their oil was imported, and half the imports were from the Middle East.<sup>11</sup>

In 1973, King Faysal of Saudi Arabia did what Americans had thought was unthinkable, he used the “oil weapon” in the form of a partial boycott on US and European consumers as a result of US emergency aid to Israel during its war with Egypt and Syria.<sup>12</sup> By 1981, the price of OPEC oil had jumped to thirty-five dollars per barrel, fundamentally changing the rules that had governed international economic and political relationships in the region.<sup>13</sup> In the long term, the shock of these price hikes was blunted by conservation methods, reserve stocks, alternative sources of oil, alternative fuels, and the eventual stabilization of world oil prices.

However, oil remains the important variable in the calculus of Persian Gulf policy decisions to this day. Without an economically competitive replacement for this vital

energy source on the horizon, the laws of supply and demand will dictate for the foreseeable future that Persian Gulf resources demand consideration in any policy decision. In addition, the ability to generate huge revenues from the sale of plentiful Persian Gulf oil provides funds for purchase of Western exports and for the pursuit of costly arms programs in the region. While the flow of oil does not now cause the acute concern that it once did, there can still be no major policy decision involving this region that does not take into account the flow of this vital resource and its importance to the world economy.

### **Continuing US commitment**

This triad of US interests in the Middle East in general and the Persian Gulf region in particular, inextricably linked, have brought the United States to the position it now occupies in regional affairs. As in the case of any region of the globe, the current US posture is a result of policy carried out to pursue those interests which are deemed vital to the security strategy of the United States and its allies. The nature of world affairs in light of these policy decisions, has brought the US to a dominant position wherein it has, ostensibly, assumed a position of hegemony in an area halfway around the world.

There is a great element of fortuitousness in the global arena of international affairs. No policy can be ordained with the certainty that it will achieve its goals, just as any action, no matter how well intentioned or how flawlessly designed, may go awry, producing unintended if not disastrous results. It is also true, however, that while US policy in the Persian Gulf may have been at times disjointed and even internally conflicting, America's overriding interests have been well defined and firmly fixed at the forefront of national security strategy.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Michael C. Hudson, "To Play the Hegemon: Fifty Years of US Policy Toward the Middle East," *The Middle East Journal* vol. 50, no. 3 (Summer 1996): 336.

<sup>2</sup> John C. Campbell, *Defense of the Middle East* (New York: Harper and Row, 1958), 4-5.

<sup>3</sup> Hudson, 331.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 332.

<sup>5</sup> Daniel C. Diller (editor), *The Middle East* (Washington D.C.: Congressional Quarterly, Inc., 1994): 18.

<sup>6</sup> Diller, 36.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 133.

<sup>8</sup> Hudson, 332.

<sup>9</sup> Diller, 133.

<sup>10</sup> Hudson, 332.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Diller, 133.

## **Chapter 3**

### **The Administration Position**

*There is no little enemy.*

—Benjamin Franklin

Crafting a foreign policy toward any nation is a difficult matter requiring detailed knowledge of the area, its history, politics and perhaps a little clairvoyance. The Persian Gulf region is a volatile, dynamic area that has known frequent political upheaval. Indeed, if there has been a constant in this region, it has been change. This section will describe in some detail the Clinton administration's policy of dual containment toward Iran and Iraq and its rationale for implementation of that policy.

### **Dual Containment Defined**

#### **Basic tenets of dual containment**

On May 18, 1993, in a speech delivered to the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Martin Indyk, then the special assistant to the President for Near East and South Asian affairs, outlined the basic tenets of the policy of dual containment. He stated that the United States would no longer play the game of balancing Iran against Iraq. The strength of the United States and its friends in the region—Egypt, Israel, Turkey and the Gulf Cooperation Council states of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United

Arab Emirates and Oman—would allow Washington to “counter both the Iraqi and Iranian regimes. We will not need to depend on one to counter the other.”<sup>1</sup>

Indyk went on to say that the administration’s goal in Iraq is “to establish clearly and unequivocally that the current regime [in Iraq] is a criminal regime, beyond the pale of international society and, in our judgment, irredeemable.”<sup>2</sup> He indicated that it is not the policy of the United States to force the breakup of Iraq and expressed a commitment to that nation’s territorial integrity, but left little doubt that a regime change is the ultimate goal of American policy.<sup>3</sup>

He also cautioned that a focus exclusively on the Iraqi threat to American interests could lead to dangerous consequences “if the balance of power in the gulf [tilts] in favor of Iran.” Whereas sanctions against Iraq have the weight of United Nations resolutions as legitimizing force, US action toward Iran does not enjoy such widespread support, thereby making “containment” of that nation problematic. Recognizing that sanctions against Iran must be multilateral, Indyk stated that Washington would work “energetically” to persuade other countries not to engage in military transactions or “normal commercial relations” with Teheran, because “Iran is a bad investment in both commercial and strategic terms for all responsible members of the international community.”<sup>4</sup>

### **Administration position**

Dual containment stems from a judgment by the administration that both Iran and Iraq, in light of their recent actions and rhetoric, pursue policies that are in direct conflict with US interests.<sup>5</sup> But, in a larger sense, this policy is an extension of the overall method of dealing with a small group of states that the administration has labeled

international ‘outlaws’ and ‘rogue states’ based on their actions and rhetoric. Anthony Lake, until recently the Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, has stated that US policy must face the reality of recalcitrant states that choose to remain outside the family of nations now committed to the pursuit of democratic institutions, the expansion of free markets, the peaceful settlement of conflict, and the promotion of collective security.<sup>6</sup> These nations, which Mr. Lake has labeled ‘backlash states’—Cuba, North Korea, Libya, Iran and Iraq—“assault the basic values of the international community and quarantine themselves from the global trend of freedom and openness.”<sup>7</sup>

These so-called backlash states share some common characteristics. Again, in the words of Mr. Lake, “[they are] ruled by cliques that control power through coercion, they suppress basic human rights and promote radical ideologies. While their political systems vary, their leaders share a common antipathy toward popular participation that might undermine existing regimes. These nations exhibit a chronic inability to engage constructively with the outside world; they are often on the defensive, increasingly criticized and targeted with sanctions in international forums. Finally, they share a siege mentality. Accordingly, they are embarked on ambitious and costly military programs—especially in weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and missile delivery systems—in a misguided quest to protect their regimes or advance their purposes abroad.”<sup>8</sup>

### **US responsibility**

The administration feels that the United States has a special responsibility to nurture and promote the core values which are essentially outlined by the overall strategy of engagement and enlargement.<sup>9</sup> Broadly this strategy rests upon the three pillars of enhanced security, global economic vitality, and the promotion of democracy throughout

the world.<sup>10</sup> It is therefore up to the United States, the argument proceeds, as the sole superpower, to neutralize, contain or perhaps eventually transform these states into constructive members of the international community. “We seek to contain the influence of these states,” says Mr. Lake, “sometimes by isolation, sometimes through pressure, sometimes by diplomatic and economic measures.”<sup>11</sup>

## **The Philosophy of Dual Containment**

### **Strategic context**

Viewed solely in the context of the Persian Gulf, Iran and Iraq could be thought of as regional superpowers, capable of overwhelming any of their neighbors. Iraq is a nation of some 20 million people.<sup>12</sup> Although weakened by the effects of two major wars and crippling sanctions it still possesses a formidable armed force. Iran, with a population of more than 65 million, is larger than all of the other Persian Gulf nations combined.<sup>13</sup> Consequently, Iran and Iraq sit astride an area of important American interest with the capability to threaten not only the interests of the United States but also the sovereignty of smaller strategic US allies that are no match for them.

Past administrations have chosen to back either Iran or Iraq in order to balance the power structure in the region and protect American interests there. The US backed the Shah of Iran and, after he was overthrown, it backed Saddam Hussein’s Iraq. These strategies have met with varying degrees of success and have been, at best, a source of consternation for some administrations, and a source of anguish for others.

In a departure from the past, the Clinton administration has crafted a policy which seeks to deal with these threats by isolating both countries regionally, cutting them off

from the world economic and trading system, and encouraging a regime change in Iraq.<sup>14</sup>

The basic strategic principle involved is the containment of both of these nations in a way that facilitates the protection of critical American interests, the security of US allies and the free flow of oil at stable prices.<sup>15</sup>

### **Soviet model**

It is clear that the administration has identified a handful of nation-states that seem to be beyond the US policy of engagement and enlargement. The policy toward these states, is largely a matter of the stick instead of the carrot. This may well be a result of observations made of recent history regarding what President Bush referred to as ‘the new world order.’

Not only has the end of the Soviet Union ushered in a new era of US power, hegemony, and opportunity, it has also provided a lesson in the conduct of foreign policy. The strategy of containment of the Soviet Union by the United States which in essence, embodied the Cold War, saw forces brought to bear in the form of political pressure, selective economic cooperation, and a crippling arms buildup which was unsustainable by Moscow over the long term. It may well be that the Clinton administration has decided that if this strategy can work against a monolithic socialist superpower in the context of a bipolar world, then it must certainly succeed when applied to a less powerful regime in a world where the US exercises de facto hegemony. Forty-seven years ago, George Kennan, writing under a pseudonym in his *Foreign Affairs* article, made the case for containment of an outlaw empire. He argued that “the United States had within its power the means to increase enormously the strains under which the Soviet policy must operate and thereby generate the breakup or gradual mellowing of Soviet power.”<sup>16</sup>

The Clinton administration believes that in dual containment, it has forged a realistic and sustainable policy that takes into account US interests and the new circumstances that now prevail in the Persian Gulf region, circumstances far different than those only seven years ago. Again, in the words of Mr. Lake, “the regimes in Baghdad and Teheran are weaker and increasingly on the defensive. Slowly but surely they are beginning to realize that there is a price to pay for their recalcitrant commitment to remain on the wrong side of history. This is not a crusade, but a genuine and responsible effort, over time, to protect American strategic interests, stabilize the international system and enlarge the community of nations committed to democracy, free markets and peace. It is still very much in our power to prevail.”<sup>17</sup>

### **Factors Supporting Dual Containment**

The view of the Clinton administration is that the current set of geopolitical circumstances allows the US to pursue a policy of containing both powers without having to build up one against the other in order to balance the two.<sup>18</sup> A number of unique circumstances have allowed the administration to pursue this course of action.

#### **End of the Cold War**

First, the end of the Cold War and the demise of the Soviet Union eliminated a major limiting factor in any consideration of US policy in the gulf. As the sole remaining superpower, the United States now has a unique and unabashed ability to conduct policy unchecked by another state with global economic and military might. While the concerns of other nations must certainly be considered in any major policy decision, the scope of Russian reaction today simply does not play into Middle East policy decisions to the

degree that did Soviet opinion. In short, the US no longer has to worry that it has to embark upon courses of action to counter hostile Soviet intentions or that Soviet actions would be generated in support of our adversaries in the region.<sup>19</sup>

Previous courses of action in every sector of the world had to be judged in light of how the Soviet Union might respond. This was especially so in light of Soviet desire to establish ties with Middle Eastern nations. For example, the Soviet-Egyptian arms agreement, announced on September 27, 1955, provided a major foothold in the region.<sup>20</sup> Also, on October 6, 1973, when Egypt and Syria jointly launched their war on Israel, US forces were placed on global alert as Soviet response could not be anticipated.<sup>21</sup>

In the view of the Clinton administration, the elimination of the Soviet Union from the superpower stage has removed a major strategic consideration from the calculus of gulf policy. Since there is no superpower to back the states that have opposed our policies in the past, the balance has been very much tilted in favor of the United States.<sup>22</sup>

### **Balance of power**

Second, a regional balance of power has been established between Iran and Iraq that now exists at a somewhat lower level than in previous years.<sup>23</sup> Both nations have been severely weakened by the pyrrhic war fought against each other from 1980 to 1988, by sanctions levied at various levels of intensity and, in the case of Iraq, by the devastating defeat it suffered in the aftermath of its invasion of Kuwait. Whereas the military capacity of either country might previously have made unilateral US containment too costly to pursue, the lower level of effort required, in the view of the Clinton administration, is now commensurate with American forward basing and deployable capabilities.



### **Cooperation of Persian Gulf allies**

Third, as a result of Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, the Gulf Cooperation Council states are somewhat less reluctant than they previously were to enter into security arrangements with the US.<sup>24</sup> Consequently, the forward basing of troops, in addition to the naval forces that have previously patrolled the gulf, makes it somewhat easier for the US to project power in the region and to deal with threats to US interests in that area.

### **Positive regional strategic context**

Fourth, the administration feels that the broad strategic context in the Middle East is helping to reinforce the overarching policies that the US has pursued for years. The US is able to take advantage of the post-Cold War environment and the results of the Gulf War to promote peace between Israel and its Arab neighbors in a way that also favors the policy of dual containment. Dual containment is viewed therefore, as a complementary piece of the overall US strategy in the Middle East which involves, as a keystone, the Arab-Israeli peace process. Progress in the peace process helps to further a long-standing goal of US policy, aids in solidifying relations with US allies in the Arab world, and, as Iran and Iraq continue to oppose an Arab-Israeli peace, these nations are further isolated thereby strengthening the dual containment policy.<sup>25</sup>

## **Implementation of the Policy**

The term dual containment is an interesting label for this policy in that it is subject to differing interpretations and is therefore a source of controversy. According to Martin Indyk, dual containment does not mean "duplicate containment." Although the policies directed toward Iran and Iraq are clearly linked by the use of this term, the administration

viewpoint is that they are not the same, “because each regime presents different challenges to our interests, and we have developed policies to deal with the specific cases.”<sup>26</sup>

### **Dual containment and Iraq**

Iraq is viewed as a nation whose ruling regime is responsible for both war crimes and crimes against humanity. Saddam Hussein has pursued brutal tactics against the Kurds in the north and the Shiites in the south. He has garnered a reputation for ruling Iraq with an iron hand. These internal actions combined with his use of biological and chemical weapons in his war with Iran and his subsequent invasion of Kuwait have all but made Iraq a pariah in the international community. It is no wonder then that the administration should regard Iraq as the consummate outlaw state and it has tailored its policy accordingly.

The United States certainly possesses the ability to implement a containment strategy with regard to Iraq. It is able to limit Iraq militarily with a powerful land and air force strategically based in the territory of GCC allies and with overwhelming sea power capable of striking anywhere in the Persian Gulf region. The US has imposed strict sanctions against Iraq severely limiting its ability to generate hard currency or sustain its military at previous levels. In addition, the administration feels that continuing progress being made in the peace process between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) denies Saddam Hussein the ability to exploit the Palestinian Issue to promote his agenda in the Arab world, thereby further containing and isolating this regime.<sup>27</sup>

However, the most formidable obstacle to Iraq’s reemergence as a major regional power and the keystone of the US containment policy remains the UN resolutions and

sanctions which make the embargo a multinational tool. It is the feeling of the administration that the sanctions are having some effect as Saddam Hussein has showed signs of compliance with the UN resolutions. Iraq has shown some degree of acceptance of Security Council Resolution 715, which provides for the long term monitoring of its WMD programs and has only recently allowed the implementation of resolutions 706 and 712 which would provide for the sale of limited quantities of oil to finance the purchase of food and other humanitarian items provided that such sale is monitored by the UN.<sup>28</sup> In addition, and perhaps most alarming, is Saddam's intractable attitude toward Kuwait. Six years after a disastrous defeat at the hand of coalition forces he still refuses to recognize that nation's sovereignty.<sup>29</sup>

### **Dual containment and Iran**

If the policy of containment applied to Iraq seems relatively concrete and well defined, then the other half of the dual containment strategy must certainly appear confusing and amorphous by contrast. The policy toward Iran is very complex and enjoys at least as much debate, controversy, and criticism as that toward Iraq if not more.

As previously mentioned, Iran is a giant in the Persian Gulf with a rich culture, a proud heritage, and a bellicose relationship with the United States. The administration views Iran as a revolutionary state that remains engaged in outlaw behavior. In the view of Mr. Indyk, "Iran is paradoxically both a lesser and greater challenge to our policy. Lesser in the sense that Iran today does not pose the threat that Iraq did to our interests some five years ago. And our challenge is to prevent Iran five years from now from becoming the kind of threat that Iraq was five years ago."<sup>30</sup>

The chief complaints concerning Iran's actions are not usually subject to a great degree of debate or challenge within the US foreign policy and academic community. Iran pursues its international objectives with policies that have earned it a position in the administration's gallery of outlaw states. Primarily the regime in Iran is accused of the promotion of terrorism and assassination throughout the world; second, there is great concern over Iran's suspected attempts to acquire nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction; third, it is acquiring offensive capabilities in the conventional area that would threaten the GCC states and is thought to take advantage of opportunities to promote instability in US allies in the gulf region; fourth, the regime openly opposes and attempts to undermine the Arab-Israeli peace process and is suspected of providing very tangible support for groups who wage campaigns of violence toward that end; and finally, Iran's record of human rights abuses is thought to be dismal.<sup>31</sup>

The administration is careful to state that this policy does not reflect a clash of cultures, nor does it seek to oppose the idea of a theocratic state based on Islam. It is not the philosophy of Iran as a state that the administration claims to oppose, rather the actions that it chooses in implementing its policies are anathema and must therefore be challenged.<sup>32</sup>

The administration seems to realize that Iran will be a player in the Persian Gulf in the future and is trying to craft a strategy that addresses behaviors which are deemed unacceptable today while at the same time trying to carve out a path for a relationship with an Iran that will be a stronger and more formidable power in the region in the future.<sup>33</sup> While the administration still claims to be open to dialogue, it hopes that with

its containment policy it will convince the Iranian regime to make choices that it considers to be more in line with desirable international behavior.

### **Implementation of the policy toward Iran**

The policy of containment toward Iran as it was applied after the Clinton administration came to power consisted largely of an arms ban, a ban on dual use technologies, a total import ban on Iranian products coming into the United States, controls on certain items for export to Iran, and a diplomatic position of blocking all lending to Iran from international financial institutions.<sup>34</sup> In the aggregate, the strategic purpose for these actions is to block the transfer to Iran of dangerous goods and technologies and to pressure Iran's economy by limiting its financial ability to acquire critical materials and fund undesirable overseas activities.<sup>35</sup>

On May 6, 1995, the president signed an executive order strengthening this policy toward Iran by prohibiting all trade, trade financing, loans, and financial services to Iran. US companies are now prohibited from purchasing Iranian oil, and new investment by American companies in Iran is prohibited. The executive order does not have extraterritorial application to foreign subsidiaries of US companies.<sup>36</sup>

The reasons for the strengthening of this policy are basically fourfold. First, this was a response to a perception by the administration that a rise in terrorist activities targeted against the Middle East peace process occurred in the Autumn of 1994 having definitive links to the state of Iran. Second, there were indications of an accelerating attempt to procure the materials and technology necessary for the construction of weapons of mass destruction. Third, US allies apparently felt that there was a contradiction between the policy of the US and its actions in that the US continued to allow some trade with Iran

while speaking in terms of containment and sanctions. Finally, domestic debate convinced the administration that the policy toward Iran should be strengthened to demonstrate a clear resolve in the commitment to contain Iran.

The case of Iran is somewhat different from that of Iraq in that sanctions are functionally unilateral in nature and do not possess the weight of international legitimacy based on UN resolutions. According to Peter Tarnoff, then State Department Under Secretary for Political Affairs, in a statement before the House International Relations Committee on November 9, 1995, "...while we continue to pursue every option available to us to increase the cost to Iran of its unacceptable activities, the costs we can impose are limited. We believe this effort to compel Iran to change its behavior deserves multilateral support. Therefore, through diplomatic channels, we are working aggressively to urge other governments to join us."<sup>37</sup>

In addition, the US can deal a strategic blow to Iran's aspirations for spreading its influence in the Middle East by bringing Israel and Syria into a peaceful relationship and securing the situation in Lebanon in a way that makes it possible for Israel to curtail activities there. This would have the proximate result of making destabilizing groups thought to be sponsored by Iran less effective in the region, thereby limiting Iran's influence.<sup>38</sup>

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, "Special Report: Clinton Administration Policy Toward the Middle East," *PolicyWatch*, May 21, 1993.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

## Notes

<sup>5</sup> Martin Indyk, Graham Fuller, Anthony Cordesman and Phebe Marr, "Symposium on Dual Containment: U.S. Policy Toward Iran and Iraq," *Middle East Policy* vol. III, no. 1, (1994): 2.

<sup>6</sup> Anthony Lake, "Confronting Backlash States," *Foreign Affairs* vol. 73, no. 2 (March/April 1994): 45.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>10</sup> The White House, "A National Security Strategy of Engagement and Enlargement," U.S. Government Printing Office: Washington D.C., February, 1996, i.

<sup>11</sup> Lake, 46.

<sup>12</sup> Daniel C. Diller (editor), *The Middle East* (Washington D.C.: Congressional Quarterly, Inc., 1994): 230.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> F. Gregory Gause III, "The Illogic of Dual Containment," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 73, no. 2 (March/April 1994): 56.

<sup>15</sup> Lake, 47.

<sup>16</sup> Lake, 55.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Indyk, 2.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Diller, 23.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Indyk, 2.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Indyk, 2.

<sup>25</sup> Indyk, 3.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Lake, 51.

<sup>29</sup> Lake, 50.

<sup>30</sup> Indyk, 5.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Lake, 52.

<sup>33</sup> Ellen Laipson, Gary Sick and Richard Cottam, "Symposium: U.S. Policy Toward Iran: From Containment to Relentless Pursuit?," *Middle East Policy*, vol. iv, nos. 1/2 (September 1995): 2.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Peter Tarnoff, "Containing Iran," US Department of State Dispatch vol. 6, no. 46, (November 13, 1995): 832.

<sup>36</sup> Laipson, 2.

<sup>37</sup> Tarnoff, 832.

<sup>38</sup> Indyk, 5.

## Chapter 4

### Criticisms of Dual Containment

*In its policy toward the Arab world, America has applied the old Islamic maxim—better sixty years of tyranny than one day of anarchy.*

—Guilain P. Denoeux

Crafting a foreign policy is, to be certain, an art if not an inexact science and must be determined based on the best judgment of those individuals who must implement the policy. It should come as no surprise that there are almost as many opinions about foreign policy as there are individuals available to consider an appropriate course of action. The Persian Gulf region is certainly no exception to this. Therefore, this section will analyze various criticisms of the dual containment policy propounded by noted academicians and foreign policy specialists.

### Illogic of Simultaneous Containment

Among the critics of this policy is F. Gregory Gause III, an Associate Professor of Political Science at Columbia University and Fellow for Arab and Islamic Studies at the Council on Foreign Relations. He states that “the dual containment policy is shot through with logical flaws and practical inconsistencies and is based on faulty geopolitical premises; it is hard to see how either Iraq or Iran could be contained, in the administration’s sense, without the cooperation of its hostile counterpart.”<sup>1</sup>



This is a notion that alludes to US policy as it had been conducted for years. In order to contain Iran, it is thought necessary to have a strong Iraq on its western border to prevent expansion of political and economic ties with other ethnic groups and nation-states. Iraq possesses a large Shiite majority in the south which has already rebelled against the Ba'athist regime and presumably would be sympathetic to an Iranian incursion into that section of Iraqi territory. Likewise, in the north, the Kurds have been brutally suppressed by Saddam Hussein and have repeatedly sought an ability to govern themselves independently, if not break away from the state of Iraq entirely. As recently as the Autumn of 1996, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) led by Jalal Talabani made overtures to Iran requesting support against attacks made by the Iraqi-backed Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP). "A weak Iraq is an inviting target for an Iran contained and isolated," states Gause.<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand, containment of Iraq, and its concomitant goal of bringing about a change in the Iraqi regime without a destabilizing civil war, is difficult to imagine without Iranian cooperation. Sanctions on Iraq lose a measure of effectiveness unless Iran is a full signatory to their imposition. The commonality of rancor toward the United States pushes the two regimes closer together despite their record of mutual enmity.<sup>3</sup>

### **Necessity of Military Presence**

The claim of administration officials that the current military situation in the gulf is now at a manageable level with respect to the ability of US forces to contain both Iran and Iraq is disputed by some who believe that such a posture cannot realistically be maintained over the long term. In the words of Dr. Anthony Cordesman, Professor of

National Security Studies at Georgetown University, “containment, deterrence,[and] the balance of power in this area to the extent it is not a balance in force by the rivalry between Iran and Iraq, is going to be a matter of American power projection, and it is going to have to be sustained over a very long time.”<sup>4</sup>

By sheer weight of population and emphasis on military power at the expense of other national concerns, Iran and Iraq have for years outstripped their gulf neighbors in military might and their willingness to use it, to which the two gulf wars attest. Containment, asserts Dr. Cordesman, “is not solely a function of what Iran can do or Iraq can do, it is a function of what the nations in the region can do, and it is basically a function of American ability to contain Iranian and Iraqi military power.”<sup>5</sup>

### **Conventional forces**

Iran does not possess the sort of military force it had under the Shah. Though it remains weakened by its war with Iraq and the cumulative effect of sanctions, it still maintains a significant force in tanks and aircraft and is shifting its supply sources away from western nations toward Russian, Chinese, and North Korean technology. In addition, the conventional buildup in Iran is well focused and may represent a new doctrinal thought in its national defense posture. Iran is in the process of acquiring a small submarine force and has a large stockpile of naval mines. Its deployment of missiles in the Strait of Hormuz and amphibious exercises in this area give Iran the ability to intimidate the GCC states, threaten the passage of oil tankers through the gulf, and create a challenge to US freedom of action in the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman. Indeed, were it not for the presence of the US Navy, Iran would dominate the sea lines of communication in the region.<sup>6</sup>

Iran is in the process of rebuilding its air defense net and is increasing its tank strength. While it will most certainly not acquire amphibious capabilities comparable to the US Navy/Marine Corps, it does have a limited capability which it exercises from time to time and, given the short distances involved in the Persian Gulf, its forces represent a threat.<sup>7</sup>

In the case of Iraq, military containment is a somewhat more finely delineated endeavor. Devastated by the Gulf War, its military is substantially diminished from earlier levels. The US has the capability to limit and monitor Iraqi activity through the imposition of no-fly zones in both the north and south. However, in comparison to its closest neighbors, it still possesses a significant force which it occasionally mobilizes as it did in 1994, and must therefore be considered a constant threat.

Few analysts would seriously suggest that Kuwaiti military power could put up a credible defense against another full scale Iraqi incursion. While the Saudi Arabian government has built up an impressive air defense force, it is questionable whether a serious defense of its border with Iraq could be maintained. Therefore it seems likely that containment of Iraq will be based on the threat of American power projection in the foreseeable future. In order to make that threat credible, continual forward basing of troops and supplies and routine projection of naval and air assets will be required.

### **Weapons of Mass Destruction**

Perhaps a greater difficulty in the containment of Iran and Iraq is the possible ability of either or both of these nations to field weapons of mass destruction and the proximate necessity to employ costly countermeasures to these threats. If these weapons were actually to be used, aside from their horrific effects on combatants, they would have a

serious impact on popular support for a containment policy within the US and might give our regional allies occasion to reconsider their support.

In the case of Iraq, the evidence indicates that most of its biological weapons capabilities were removed before air strikes in the Gulf War were carried out. While air strikes had a greater impact on chemical weapons emplacements, the UN special commission has indicated that Iraq almost certainly has retained and hidden very substantial chemical feed stocks and the capability to deliver these loads with extended range SCUD assemblies.<sup>8</sup> Finally, it seems highly likely, given obfuscations during the UN sanctions regime, that the Iraqis plan to resuscitate their nuclear weapons program when possible.

With respect to Iran, the regime has sought this class of weapon since the Iraqi's demonstrated the devastating capabilities of their chemical and biological weapons in the first Gulf War.<sup>9</sup> Teheran has strengthened its arms relationships with North Korea and China and is thought to have an active chemical and biological weapons program.<sup>10</sup> In addition, many believe that Iran is a serious candidate for nuclear weapons acquisition. Whether the motivations of the Teheran government stem from insecurity and a desire for legitimate self defense and deterrence, or a penchant for terrorism and rogue activity, it seems clear that the concern for such weapons in Iranian hands is a sobering one.

The bottom line here is that as long as containment of Iran and Iraq is a part of US policy it will involve some measure of military force as a guarantee. Likewise, as long as military force is required, it will be manifested in the presence of an American power projection capability. And, finally, American presence, and future requirements to

reinforce that presence, will be subjected to greater risks as Iran and Iraq enhance their WMD capabilities.

### **Duration of Containment and Cost to the United States**

One of the overarching rationales of policy in the Persian Gulf region involves the magnitude of proven oil reserves upon which the United States depends for much of its energy consumption. While a number of alternative energy sources are available today, none has matched oil for its relatively low cost and ease of distribution. The International Energy Agency in Paris, in a 1994 forecast, predicted that energy problems would be alleviated in the future by an increased output from Middle Eastern nations from 20 million barrels a day to 45 million barrels a day by the year 2010.<sup>11</sup> Such a statement would indicate that the world will continue to be dependent on Middle Eastern oil for some time to come. If this is indeed the case, and if the political situation in Iran and Iraq does not change significantly, the US must be willing to maintain a presence in the Persian Gulf for some time to come.

This presence will be increasingly difficult to justify as the post Cold War defense budget of the United States becomes a lucrative target for budget cuts during a time of deficit spending. According to Dr. Cordesman, “containment is a function of arms control, denial of arms imports...and a sustained and highly capable American military power...we may have the right strategy, but is it clear that we are willing to pay for it?”<sup>12</sup> If indeed the policy of dual containment casts the United States in the position of Persian Gulf sentinel, ever watchful for purported transgressions by either nation, it must be willing to bear what may be a long and costly watch. In this light, such a policy could

turn out to be an expensive endeavor that the US can ill afford as fewer future dollars are devoted to national defense programs.

## **Containing Iran**

As a result of the rancorous recent history of relations between the United States and Iran, the debate over foreign policy between these two nations is naturally heated. Both nations have vilified the other as Iran has labeled its western adversary ‘The Great Satan’ and the US has characterized the Iranian regime as a ‘rogue’, ‘outlaw’, or ‘backlash state.’ Each state considers the other to be a serious threat to its national interests and the resulting relationship has been one of distrust and hostility.

The catalyst for the poor relations of recent years occurred with the Iranian revolution in 1979. The Shah of Iran had been the most important US ally in the region. Upon his ouster, the US saw a total reversal in Iranian policy as the populace and clergy linked the US with the oppression of the Shah’s regime. The subsequent seizure of the US embassy and the plight of the US hostages, played out each night in America’s living rooms, engendered a similar enmity in the US which has yet to be wholly forgotten.

### **Can sanctions be effective?**

One of the first questions that must be asked when testing the viability of any foreign policy, asserts Gary Sick, adjunct professor at Columbia University, is whether that policy will achieve its intended objective. For Mr. Sick, the answer to that question when applied to the US policy of containment toward Iran is a clear and resounding ‘no.’<sup>13</sup>

The likelihood that sanctions will achieve a stated goal of foreign policy is, of course, problematic. The nature of unilateral sanctions makes attainment of that goal even more

dubious. The United States possesses a greater ability than perhaps any other nation in the world to apply economic pressure. As the world's largest economy, and a leading exporter of cutting edge technology, the US can deny significant resources to other nations and pressure allies to deny resources as well.

In addition, since many international commodities are denominated in dollars, the denial of this hard currency makes international exchange more difficult, especially as it applies to the world oil market. Indeed, the announcement of the total trade embargo by the United States against Iran on May 6, 1995, had a psychological effect driving the rial to new lows against the dollar.<sup>14</sup> This sharp correction accurately reflected the lack of investor confidence in the Iranian economy.<sup>15</sup>

Nevertheless, the United States is not the only source of trade in the world, and it is doubtful that a nation such as Iran would be crippled by denial of the US as a source of trade. Some of the staunchest allies of the United States, namely Germany, Japan, and Italy, are Iran's main trading partners. Nations such as France, Russia, and China stand in line to do business with Iran and are delighted to see the United States out of the lucrative Iranian market.<sup>16</sup> Even the Arab states of the Middle East, which were supposedly the beneficiaries of the US policy, were unwilling to endorse the embargo.<sup>17</sup> Regional players such as Turkey, Morocco, Oman, and Jordan all negotiated or signed economic agreements with Iran after the announcement of the embargo.<sup>18</sup>

Another compelling reason for the reluctance of other nations to support the US sanctions is that much of Iran's short and medium term national debt is owed to the European Community and to Japan. As a result, these countries have a vested interest in Iran's economic development and its ability to generate the funds necessary to service this

debt.<sup>19</sup> Economic pressure which forces the atrophy of Iran's economy and Teheran's proximate default on international debt would be diametrically opposed to the financial well being of many nations.

While it is true that the health of the Iranian economy is less than stellar, economic malaise in that nation stems more from mismanagement by the ruling clerics than it does from unilateral US sanctions.<sup>20</sup> Iranians are dissatisfied with their economy and are not shy about making their views known. About one third of Iran's oil revenues now go toward paying off its creditors as a result of a consumer import binge following the end of the Iran-Iraq war.<sup>21</sup>

In the words of Gary Sick, "Our policies do make Iran's life more difficult in many ways...but the notion that we are going to drive Iran into bankruptcy and thereby bring down the Islamic government is a pipedream."<sup>22</sup>

### **Linkage of Iran with Iraq**

Another criticism of the dual containment policy stems from the linkage this term implies and the broadbrushed characterization made with respect to two states that are, in point of fact, quite different. While the US might adopt similar policies toward various nations with regard to membership in international institutions such as NATO, or would certainly view some nations in the same vein in time of war, it is arguably a departure from the norm to otherwise link two states with largely the same policy.

Dr. Graham Fuller, a senior analyst at RAND Corporation, believes that lumping these states together is not a useful policy and may indeed be counterproductive. While both states present very serious challenges to US policy, dual containment, he feels,



conceals more than it illuminates. “If you’re looking for bad guys,” says Dr. Fuller, “why not throw in Syria and Libya and call it quadruple containment?”<sup>23</sup>

If it is true that the ruling regime in Iraq has no redeeming characteristics, but that a dialogue leading to a more harmonious relationship with Iran is possible, then the strategy of linking these two nations may only have the effect of driving Iran farther away from the negotiating table. It is only reasonable that the Iranian government should resent being identified with a neighboring government that the majority of the international community has labeled a global pariah. With nothing more than human nature as a guideline, it is plain to see the confusion engendered by the offer of a simultaneous carrot and stick in the form of offers for dialogue and sanctions. If the ultimate goal of the administration is a viable relationship with a friendly, responsible Iranian government, it is possible that the policy of dual containment might ultimately be a self defeating one.

### **Are Iran and Iraq alike**

Following a similar line of logic is the notion that Iran and Iraq should not be linked merely because they are so different, in other words, Iran may support policies that the US finds objectionable but it does not deserve to be lumped in the same pile with Iraq. Dr. Fuller has outlined a number of key points which are helpful in assessing the dichotomous nature of the two states:

1. Iraq is ruled by a single man; Iran is a multi-centered power with many competing figures.
2. Iraq is a harsh, totalitarian dictatorship; Iran is a partially open society and continuing to evolve.
3. Iraq has a totally controlled press that says nothing; the Iranian press is relatively open.
4. Iraq has a rubber stamp parliament, whereas Iran has a genuine debate in parliament, bruising discussions and internal controversy that make interesting reading.

5. Iraq is absolutely non-evolving in any sense because everything depends on Saddam Hussein...I (Dr. Fuller) would argue that Iran is constantly evolving in quite significant ways.
6. There's an identity crisis within Iraq; whereas Iranians have a very strong sense of historical identity and who they are.
7. Iraq is a failing multi-ethnic society at a high risk of breakup; whereas I would argue that Iran is a relatively successful multi-ethnic society glued together by Persian culture.
8. Iraq is part of an Arab interstate system that complicates its behavior considerably and makes it a difficult problem for us to deal with it in general; whereas Iran is an independent, individual state tied to no one in its behavior.
9. Iraq is a secular leftist state; whereas Iran is an Islamic state.
10. Iraq has launched two wars against its neighbors in the past decade and a half; Iran fundamentally has not been involved in launching military conflict, although it has had its confrontations in the Gulf in the past.<sup>24</sup>

While it may be true that Iran deserves the characterization of a rogue or outlaw state as the administration has stated, there are additional probing questions that must be addressed. Does the Teheran regime possess any redeeming characteristics that would support a worthwhile relationship with the United States? Is it in the US national interest to attempt to foster such a relationship? Will the policy of dual containment achieve this? It is possible that the answers to these questions might lead to an alternative policy which could be more beneficial in the long run.

### **Can Iran be isolated?**

With a focus on the Persian Gulf states, Iran must certainly be regarded as a major player. With a population greater than that of all the other gulf states combined, a strategic location and huge oil reserves, Iran will remain dominant in the region for the foreseeable future.<sup>25</sup> According to Dr. Alon Ben-Meir, professor at the New School for Social Research in New York, there can be no permanent peace and stability in the gulf without involving Iran as it will always be in a position either to exploit unrest in the region or to work toward cooperation and peace.<sup>26</sup>

An analogy to this argument is the policy toward China, a nation that was not recognized by the US for years. While the United States frequently speaks out against China's unenviable record on human rights and attempts to apply pressure to motivate China to behave differently in the international arena, the US still grants China most favored nation trade status and maintains diplomatic relations. The rationale for this policy is, in large measure, simply that China possesses a huge population, maintains a rapidly expanding economy, and will certainly be a major global player in years to come.

While Iran does not possess a population or economic prowess approaching that of China, it is still a large nation that is growing in both of these areas. In the microcosm of the Persian Gulf, Iran may well be too large a piece of the puzzle to contain or to ignore while still attempting to maintain a successful regional policy.

### **Islamic nationalism**

While many nations in the world claim Islam as their predominant religion, no other nation maintains this way of life as the basis for government and day to day life as does Iran. Although Shiite, Iran has spearheaded the modern rise of Islamism and is still looked upon by other Islamists as a source of inspiration.<sup>27</sup> Regardless of the socioeconomic failures of the Iranian revolution, the Iranian government and society have survived and are evolving while maintaining a basic linkage to the Islamic movement.

While Iran is the first 'modern' nation to be so controlled by the tenets of Islam, it may not be the last. How Iran is dealt with will have major ripple effects around the Arab-Islamic world, a world that does not want to see Islam humiliated, even if some of its states are staunch enemies of Iran.<sup>28</sup>

## **Containing Iraq**

### **Effectiveness of sanctions**

As previously mentioned, the application of a containment strategy toward Iraq has been, arguably, a more concrete, tangible, achievable objective than has the same strategy with respect to Iran. With the weight of UN resolutions and international consent in support, the sanctions against Iraq have been maintained with continuity since the end of the Gulf war. However, a number of critics of this policy question the effectiveness of the sanctions in achieving their objectives.

The administration has stated that the ruling regime in Iraq embodies no redeeming characteristics and that a principal goal of this policy is the eventual ouster of Saddam Hussein from power. Six years after the war, Saddam is still in power. With the Iraqi economy in a state of near ruin and a standard of living that is the envy of none, Iraq limps along with a tyrannical leader at its helm, in spite of the crumbling ship of state he despotically commands.

The position of the administration is that the sanctions are beginning to bite. Martin Indyk has pointed to the inspections of weapons facilities by UN inspectors as some evidence that the sanctions are having the calculated effect.<sup>29</sup> Others claim that the sanctions are not having the intended effect and point to Saddam's intractable attitude toward other UN resolutions as evidence. Iraq has yet to fully recognize the sovereignty of the Kuwaiti nation, fully destroy or remove its weapons of mass destruction or comply with the demands made by the international community regarding its dismal record of human rights abuses.<sup>30</sup>

There are various estimates on the health of Iraq's economy but, with the limited flow of reliable information in and out of Iraq, such estimates must be taken cautiously. It seems clear though that the situation in Iraq is a desperate one. While Iraq was experiencing an economic slide before the sanctions were put into force, these measures have only accelerated the gravity of that nation's economic plight. Inflation, which had reached nearly 400 percent per year in 1989 went to 1000 percent after the sanctions were put in place.<sup>31</sup> Per-capita income was estimated at \$335 per year in 1988; by 1991 it had dropped to \$65 per year and by 1992 it was \$44.<sup>32</sup>

On a humanitarian basis, many argue that the sanctions have had a grave effect, not on the Iraqi regime, but on the civilian populace who must endure daily hardship while Saddam Hussein looks away in total indifference. Many critics point to an increased infant mortality rate and austere living conditions which have ensued since the onset of the international embargo. It is reasonable to believe that life in Iraq is increasingly becoming a hardship while the leader of that nation lives in relative opulence.

Iraq is in the position of having to endure a seemingly endless period of hardship as the great majority of the international community places it in isolation. Saddam's behavior, therefore, seems to fly in the face of common decency. Only a power hungry despot with little regard for the welfare of his people would refuse to relent in the face of such measures, for it seems certain that he is forced to tighten his grip on the populace in order to maintain control. If this is the case, critics point out, then the likelihood that sanctions will ever convince Saddam to relent seems dismal.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> F. Gregory Gause III, "The Illogic of Dual Containment," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 73, no. 2 (March/April 1994): 56/57.

<sup>2</sup> Gause, 60.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Martin Indyk, Graham Fuller, Anthony Cordesman and Phebe Marr, "Symposium on Dual Containment: U.S. Policy Toward Iran and Iraq," *Middle East Policy* vol. III, no. 1, (1994): 13.

<sup>5</sup> Indyk, 11.

<sup>6</sup> Indyk, 13.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Indyk, 11.

<sup>9</sup> Shahrām Chubin, *Iran's National Security Policy: Intentions, Capabilities and Impact* (Washington D.C.: The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1994), 45.

<sup>10</sup> Chubin, 47.

<sup>11</sup> Indyk, 14.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ellen Laipson, Gary Sick and Richard Cottam, "Symposium: U.S. Policy Toward Iran: From Containment to Relentless Pursuit?," *Middle East Policy*, vol. iv, nos. 1/2 (September 1995): 5.

<sup>14</sup> Gary Sick, "A Sensible Policy Toward Iran," *Middle East Insight*, vol. xi, no. 5 (July/August 1995): 21.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Alon Ben-Meir, "The Dual Containment Strategy is No Longer Viable," *Middle East Policy*, vol. iv, no. 3 (March 1996): 60.

<sup>17</sup> Sick, 21.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ben-Meir, 60.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Laipson, 7.

<sup>22</sup> Sick, 21.

<sup>23</sup> Indyk, 7.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ben-Meir, 61.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Indyk, 4.

<sup>30</sup> Thomas R. Mattair and Stephen Brannon, "The U.N. Sanctions Against Iraq: Issues Influencing Continuation or Removal," *Middle East Policy* vol. III, no. 1, (1994): 28-32.

<sup>31</sup> Mattair, 37.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

## Chapter 5

### Suggestions for a New Policy

*The management of a balance of power is a permanent undertaking, not an exertion that has a foreseeable end.*

—Henry Kissinger

### A View of the Total Policy

#### End of the balancing act

It should be clear after examining the administration position concerning a foreign policy toward Iran and Iraq as well as the chief criticisms of this policy, that the debate over the proper course of action is as diverse as it is heated. In this section, I will attempt to analyze the substantive aspects of the debate and suggest a modified policy.

It is important to examine both of these regional actors not only in the context of today's situation but also in the light of possible future developments. There can be no doubt that history is an invaluable guide in analyzing foreign policy and applying the lessons it yields to future prospects. However, it is also unwise to be hamstrung by the past, naturally assuming that the policies which have borne fruit in the past will blossom as successfully in the future.

One of the oldest arguments concerning US policy toward Iran and Iraq is that there can be no stability unless these nations are balanced against each other. Indeed, as

previously mentioned, this was a cornerstone of US policy for years. While dual containment does not espouse this philosophy, there are those who still maintain that it is not only viable but necessary.

However, it is hard to justify the substance of that position in light of world events of the past seven years. While the US can never hope to manage the affairs of other nations in minute detail and most certainly does not wish to do so, it is still unconstrained by a global peer and able to exert great influence without creating a balancing act in the region. With the end of the Cold War, the most important rationale for this balancing act vanished and there is little reason to believe it is a requirement for containment in the current environment.

The weakened state of both nations in the wake of two major regional wars and a battery of sanctions and embargoes has left each of these powers in a poor position to seriously threaten US power. Either nation would have the ability to create some temporary regional instability through the strength of arms, but the weight of coalition forces or of US unilateral action would be decisive nevertheless. This power base is relatively strong and stable, existing as it does through a network of agreements with regional allies, deployable forces, and pre-positioned assets in the area. In addition, the agreements and alliances with such regional powers as Israel, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey, although tenuous at times, allow great latitude in regional operations.

In short, the balancing act that was a necessary piece of the previous foreign policy has been washed away by events of the recent past. Although this situation may certainly change, it is reasonable to examine the situation in the light of current consequences and to avoid being boxed in by historical context.



### **The likelihood of regional alliance**

Another principal criticism of the dual containment policy as a whole is that it will have a tendency to drive Iran and Iraq together as they perceive the United States as a mutual enemy. Such an alliance, the argument proceeds, would be a catastrophic turn of events for US policy as the two powers presumably would be able to combine their various capabilities in a coordinated fashion, thereby thwarting the actions taken by the US in its aspirations to foster a community of free market democracies in the region.

It is truly difficult to fathom a set of political circumstances that would drive Iran and Iraq into close alliance. Although they occasionally have interaction, as when Iraq flew war planes into Iran as a safe haven during the Gulf war (warplanes which Iran has yet to return), the history of discord between these two cultures, both ancient and recent, is well documented. The recent war between these two powers which raged for eight years saw the slaughter of troops in human waves, the horrific effects of chemical warfare, and missile attacks on urban civilian populations. The effects of this war are certainly still fresh in the minds of the combatants and probably remain one of the major catalysts behind the purported efforts of the Teheran regime to seek nuclear weapons technology.

There can be no doubt that the aura of animosity toward the US is shared by both nations. However, the enmity sowed in the seeds of ghastly warfare combined with the obvious cultural, historic, ethnic, religious, and political differences between the two nations militates against any substantive alliance between the two.

As further evidence in this regard, it is interesting to note that Iran has remained surprisingly distant in its dealings with Iraq. One might be tempted to make the assumption that Iran, seeing Iraq in a state of some disarray, would make overtures

toward the Shiite population in the southern region of Iraq. However, there has been no evidence of a major campaign by the Iranians to support insurrection by these factions, and the Iraqi Shiites seem to have maintained their Marsh Arab identity.

### **Containment of Iraq**

Critics of the dual containment policy as it is applied to Iraq point chiefly to the effect of sanctions on the regime, claiming that little or no substantive progress has been made. Sanctions have been in force against Iraq for some time, yet Saddam remains in power and he still has not fully complied with the battery of UN resolutions that would allow the restoration of some level of normalized trade. Some denounce the sanctions on the basis that they are having a brutal effect on the Iraqi people, driving the infant mortality rate to a horrible level and generally making life miserable. Still others warn that Saddam will never give up his grasp on power and that Iraq could become so weakened on an institutional basis that chaos and disorder in the pattern of Lebanon or the Balkans could be the only proximate result.

It is true that Saddam remains in power as of this writing. The sanctions have no doubt caused severe hardship and may indeed be weakening the fabric of Iraqi society. However, the unfortunate truth of the matter is that the administration is faced with choosing either inaction, or the very limited universe of other acceptable policy tools available.

If the US were to choose inaction there is every reason to believe that Saddam would again test western resolve with further incursions toward the Kuwaiti border. Such an assault on the sovereignty of that nation could no more be tolerated in 1997 than it was in

1990. Moreover, the consequences for US interests in the Persian Gulf region and throughout the world would be severe.

If inaction is not a reasonable course of action, then there would appear to be only two remaining options. The use of force to bring about US goals in Iraq is clearly unacceptable at this time. It was not deemed reasonable at the conclusion of the Gulf War and is far less so at this juncture. The only remaining option therefore is the denial of economic power to Saddam. This option prevents the Iraqi regime from obtaining the necessary capital with which it might forge additional military strength or ultimately acquire weapons of mass destruction. While it is a difficult strategy requiring patience and commitment, the use of economic sanctions to motivate compliance with UN directives seems to be the only reasonable policy tool available at this time.

## **Containment of Iran**

### **The effect of sanctions**

As a cornerstone of its efforts to moderate the behavior of the Iranian regime, the administration has incorporated sanctions against Iran. As noted previously these sanctions have been imposed unilaterally, without either the force of UN resolution or the united authority of coalition endeavor to ensure their effectiveness. While the US has the ability to affect the economy of Iran, it does not have the ability to cripple it. Therefore, the likelihood that sanctions will have the desired effect is problematic.

Although other nations have agreed to limit or cut off the supply of weapons to Iran, there are alternative sources for almost any commodity required. Indeed, most countries have stated that they prefer dialogue to the notion of sanctions, and there is compelling

logic behind this fact. Iran has billions of dollars of loans outstanding to other nations. It would be poor fiscal policy indeed for a nation to loan Iran money and then immediately institute a policy that would drive it into economic ruin, thereby risking the possibility that such loans could ever be repaid.<sup>1</sup> In addition, most countries view Iran as a large market that can be exploited by industry. It is therefore unlikely that unilateral sanctions imposed by the US will motivate the regime in Iran to modify its behavior.

### **Linkage of Iran and Iraq**

A further problem inherent in the dual containment strategy is the linkage it forges between the two nations. This seems to be an overt statement by the administration to the rest of the foreign policy community that the United States no longer feels an obligation to balance one power against the other in order to achieve its objectives in the region. The argument that a balancing act is no longer required is an acceptable one. The problem lies in the notion that the administration feels compelled to advertise this point by using it as a label for the policy.

Certainly it is not the norm for an administration to so closely link the policies toward two so disparate nations as to make them inseparable. This linkage denies the administration flexibility in dealing with each nation as a free agent for the sake of making a statement which is well understood without resorting to such a label. The very term “dual containment” motivates anyone examining the policy to think of these two states as similar entities with identical aspirations and methodologies. While the Iranian regime does not always behave in a way that the US would like, such a label conjures up an image of the regime in Iran that is much the same as the image of Saddam Hussein—that of a brutal dictator who has become a pariah among nations.

This linkage must ultimately be counterproductive. It is not reasonable to call for dialogue with the Iranian regime while painting them with the same broad brush that colors Saddam. To do so ignores the moderating changes that have occurred in Iran since the revolution in 1979 and perpetuates an air of hostility that the US purports to disdain. In order to pursue the broader context of enlargement and engagement and to make some progress toward a more reasonable relationship with the Iranian government, it seems that the linkage between Iran and Iraq should be eliminated and the term dual containment replaced with a more constructive title or eliminated entirely.

### **The question of enlargement and engagement**

The national security strategy of the United States as espoused by the White House is one of global engagement and enlargement of the community of secure, free market democracies. Indeed this precept is echoed by senior administration officials from the Departments of State and Defense and can be readily heard by anyone who cares to watch the evening news on a periodic basis.

Of necessity one must ask: Does the dual containment strategy fit the overall strategy of enlargement and engagement as put forth by the administration. On a cursory analysis, the strategy of dual containment would seem to be contradictory when compared with this precept. It is hard to imagine how a nation could be persuaded to join the international community of free market democracies when faced with crippling sanctions and containment. It is only reasonable to believe then that the administration has singled out these nations as having no redeeming characteristics that would auger toward such an invitation and that they must be kept in containment, much as a convicted felon is relegated to prison for the safety and well being of a civilized society.

Indeed, this is just the sort of argument that Anthony Lake makes as he labels Iran and Iraq backlash states, and the central point here is well taken. If a nation is a continual threat to the safety of its neighbors and cannot exist in a civilized global community, other nations, in an effort to secure their own well being, may be forced to embark on a policy of containment or even elimination to ensure their survival. History is replete with examples of nations with ambitions of conquest and hegemony so numerous that it is not necessary to list them here.

The problem for the policy of dual containment is how to decide when a nation has become such a rogue or outlaw that the inviting hand of engagement and enlargement must be withdrawn and the clamp of containment applied. Iraq certainly seems to be a reasonable candidate for a policy of containment. Only the most charitable of souls would be able to ignore Iraq's attack upon Iran in 1980 and the use of weapons shunned by the vast majority of civilized society; only the most forgiving would ignore the invasion of Kuwait and the subsequent threats to that nation's sovereignty; and only the most benign and passive could ignore the threatening rhetoric of Saddam Hussein, the relentless pursuit of weapons of mass destruction, and the human rights violations he continues to perpetrate in his own country.

However, the case of Iran is not as clear cut as that of Iraq. The question of engagement versus containment in this area is a point that is more easily debated. Iran is a country that seems to be more malleable than its neighbor to the west. Therefore, it is possible that the opportunity exists for a more balanced approach which could have a greater chance for success in the long run.

## **China model**

It is interesting to note the behaviors that China manifests that run counter to the espoused values of the United States. It would be difficult to characterize China as a democracy in the current state of its political development, and its record of human rights abuses is a constant cause for concern. Nevertheless, the United States maintains relations with China because it is an important regional actor that will have an impact on global affairs. In addition, we would like to help China navigate toward what might eventually be its journey toward free market democracy.

This same argument can easily be applied to the situation we see with Iran. We do not like everything that Iran does, but it is still possible to deal with this nation in order to more constructively achieve our objectives. While Iran does not possess the size and global consequence that China commands, it is a major regional player and the analogy is compelling.

## **A policy of balanced engagement**

Rather than apply a stern policy of containment toward Iran, the fruits of which may never be fully realized, it may be preferable to pursue a more balanced policy. A dialogue with Iran in which clear and well defined US interests are delineated seems a more realistic approach to the problem. Most nations prefer dialogue to the notion of containment based on the arguments already put forth, and the likelihood of successful isolation of Iran is debatable.

Primary US interests include continuation of the Middle East peace process and the cessation of destabilizing activity that entails, and nuclear non-proliferation by Iran. The quid pro quo for these actions could be an end to the embargo against Iran and the

economic pressure brought to bear through US influence. While there are other complaints about Teheran's behavior such as human rights violations, these would have to be dealt with on a continuing basis much as the US deals with China.

A US policy which is less confrontational, that brings other powers such as Japan and European allies into the issue, and which offers a more balanced carrot and stick approach would not only meet with greater global acceptance, but might be more productive over time.

#### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Tarnoff, 832.



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